The sudden anger that stung Kirk to his feet, and a cold draft under his ribs told him two things --first that it was possible, second that he was inescapably part of all Spock was and did.

"Don't even think that! Whatever stress you're under, you are not a murderer!" He gripped Spock's arms with bruising strength, compelling agreement.

"You never think of failure, do you?"

Kirk dropped his hands and bent to retrieve the phaser he had let fall on the floor. He pulled his shirt over his head and tugged it into place, squaring his shoulders, assuming the mannerisms of command with its outward symbol before he answered.

"That's not what I get paid for."

And he felt whole again, with Spock at his shoulder, competent to cope with anything from the Admiralty to Armageddon. Tomorrow Spock would be on the bridge, applying his formidable intelligence to the problem of the two deaths. Perseverence would combine with luck, and they would catch the killer. Then, as he had promised, there would be time. Anticipation tingled through him like a transfusion of new blood. He was ready to salt a wavicle's tail or turn a black hole inside out, and he hadn't yet thought to hide the spring in his step or the lilt in his voice when they rounded the corner near Spock's cabin and found T'serek at his vigil.

The boy had heard them coming, that was evident, or they would have found themselves staring down the phaser he had drawn and not had time to replace. He stood at ease, apparantly just another soldier at a boring duty station, but Kirk knew better. He could feel the boy's shock and embarrassment as if they were his own. T'serek had not known Spock's cabin was empty, he had been prepared to guard it with his life. In sudden hindsight, Kirk saw implications of Spock's withdrawal from his company in the past days that had not occurred to him before. T'serek could hardly be blamed for hoping. And here they came, strolling, glowing, through the corridors, the only two people on the ship without the sense to stay under cover. It was a piece of cruelty neither of them would have committed deliberately. Once again there was nothing he could say or do.

"See McCoy and get yourself off the sicklist," he said to Spock. "I'll see you on the bridge."

In his own cabin he threw the sticky evidence of his own release into the 'fresher, stepped into the shower and considered the miracle of desire. He had been out on his feet, tied in knots with tension, wallowing in self-pity and frustration. Now he was charged with life. Spock wanted him. As a lover. Well, his psychfile said he could go that way. No danger to a younger man's career, no possibility of favoritism; Spock's commitment to the Fleet was as deep as his own. He closed his eyes and ducked his head under the spray, turned and let it beat down on the back of his neck. Spock wanted him and he wanted Spock. Beautiful. Every sensation, from the water rushing over him, the blast of warm air, the smooth coolness of sheets, was as fresh and delightful as if his body was newly created. Created new for Spock.

But he had needed sleep. When battle stations sounded, he had to fight his way to consciousness and his clothes fought him as he stumbled into them. The airtight barriers had slammed into place all over the ship--per his orders, as a way of trapping the killer--and he had to fight his way past three of them to reach the turbolist. As a result, he was last on the scene except for McCoy. Two security men--Lapsley and Nicholson--were bending over two bodies on the floor, and Scotty was operating a strange piece of equipment that he wore strapped to his chest. He was pointing a pickup of metal at the two bodies and reading a display at the top of the gadget.

Lapsley called to him. "Captain? The woman's dead. Her name was Vonnie Tyler. But Mason's still breathing."

"Keep him breathing til McCoy gets here. What's keeping Spock? What's that Scotty?"

"A heat imager, sir. Pretty primitive, though. I can't get a thing when everybody's crowded in like this. Since regular sensors weren't giving us anything, one of my lads whipped this up. It'll show you where a man crossed an empty room six hours ago--but I can't get a picture right now."

"Try up and down the hall." Kirk peered at the screen but couldn't make sense of the smokey swirling there. McCoy came through the door and went directly to the man Lapsley was working over. For the first time, Kirk let himself take in the nature of the injuries. It was obvious that the killer didn't care what sex its victims were.

"Can he talk, Bones?"

McCoy didn't stop working. "It might kill him."

"I've got to know what's doing it, Bones. I'm sorry. Bring him around. Nicholson, put that blanket over him."

McCoy didn't argue. They had had to face that before. One life could not come before the ship's safety. He sprayed a stimulant over Mason's heart. "It won't last long," he warned.

Kirk bent close. "Mason, this is the Captain. What attacked you?"

"Get back," the man answered, making an effort as his eyes opened, but not tracking very well. He seemed to be reliving the attack. "Get back, Vonnie--run!" His eyes widened in horror. "Oh, God it's...Aaaaaahhhhh!" He screamed and tried to twist away, fighting Kirk's restraining hands.

"Mason!" Kirk's command voice penetrated the terror for a minute and Mason recognized him, clinging like a child.

"Captain--" It was a sigh of relief, but his voice was fading.

"Tell me what you saw, Mason."

"Not--not human--" And he went limp, his dead weight dragging Kirk's hands down.

"Is he--?"

McCoy felt for the throat pulse. "No. Passed out."

Kirk sat back on his heels, relieved and sweating. "Maybe Spock can make sense out of it."

As if to refute him, the comm unit opened up with another blast of the siren, quickly cut off.

"Security to the Captain. Sir, there's been another attack--in officer's country--" he gave the coordinates "One of our men is down, and Mr. Spock is missing."

"God damn it!" Kirk's ready anger flared, crosscircuiting panic. Why couldn't the Vulcan stay put. "Get these doors open, they're not helping. Scotty, bring your gadget."